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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRISTINA 000777

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [KV](#) [UNMIK](#)
SUBJECT: KOSOVO: BELGRADE INCREASES RHETORICAL AND OTHER
FORMS OF PRESSURE AGAINST INDEPENDENCE

Classified By: Chief of Mission Tina Kaidanow for reasons 1.4, (b), (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY. Recent statements - public and private - by Serbian Minister for Kosovo Slobodan Samardzic and others in the Ministry's hierarchy demonstrate Belgrade's intention to increase pressure on Kosovo's Serbs to toe the line, strengthen parallel structures, and -- as a likely outcome -- provoke Kosovo's Albanian majority. Samardzic appeared in Gracanica November 1 and announced to a gathering of Serbian parliamentarians and local Serb residents that Belgrade would appoint "temporary municipal councils" in Serb-majority areas between the November 17 Kosovo elections and anticipated Serbian municipal elections in the spring. He also personally warned Petar Vasic, the moderate mayor of Novo Brdo, not to participate in the elections, and, according to another moderate, Bishop Teodosije (protect), appears intent on ending Serbia's participation in the CoE-led Reconstruction Implementation Commission (RIC) -- a successful Kosovo government-funded effort to rebuild Kosovo's Serb Orthodox churches. Samardzic was also in Mitrovica November 8 with the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, warning of "punishment" for Kosovo Albanians if they declared independence. We will need to ensure that Kosovo's ethnic Albanian leaders are prepared for -- and will not take counter-productive measures to protest -- the likely escalation in provocative action and statements by the Serbian and northern Serb leadership, while coordinating an effective international response to any actions by Belgrade that clearly challenge UNMIK's authority. END SUMMARY.

Samardzic in Gracanica

2. (C) Serbian Minister for Kosovo Slobodan Samardzic appeared November 1 in the Kosovo Serb enclave of Gracanica, just outside of Pristina, at a specially-held session of the Serbian Parliament's Assembly Committee for Kosovo and Metohija. A readout of the meeting, helpfully provided by Embassy Belgrade, reports that Samardzic mentioned a Serbian government plan for reacting to a declaration of independence, but claimed to be unable to reveal it for "strategic reasons." Samardzic also announced that his ministry would open an office in Gracanica and asserted in

blunter terms than usual that the Serbian government would run parallel government structures for Kosovo Serbs after final status.

¶3. (C) In a sign that the Serbian government is increasing the pressure on Kosovo Serbs to toe the Belgrade line, Samardzic also indicated for the first time publicly that Serbia would create "temporary municipal councils" in Serb areas to function between the November 17 Kosovo elections, which Kosovo Serbs have been pressured to boycott, and the anticipated, but not yet scheduled parallel Serbian municipal elections in the spring. Samardzic said these councils would allow the continuation of normal municipal activities in Serb-majority municipalities and obviate the need for Serbs to vote at all in the Kosovo elections. (Note: USOP has pressed our local Russian colleagues, who agree that such a move would directly challenge UNMIK's authority under UNSCR 1244, to use their influence in Belgrade to counter any effort at creating such appointed councils. The idea has apparently not yet died, but is being reconsidered, according to the Russian liaison office head in Pristina.)

¶4. (C) At a November 7 meeting, the moderate mayor of Novo Brdo, Petar Vasic, who has stated in public his strong opposition to Belgrade's policy of electoral boycott and non-participation in Kosovo institutions (and whose municipality is balanced almost 50-50 between ethnic Serbs and Albanians), told us that Samardzic personally had telephoned him to warn him that his Serbian government-funded salary would be cut off if he participated in the upcoming elections. So worried about the effects of a boycott and the possible Kosovo Albanian reaction to Belgrade's appointing its own municipal councils that he "can't sleep," Vasic

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questioned the future of the Ahtisaari plan's decentralization program -- which would expand Novo Brdo -- and feared the loss of any influence for Kosovo Serbs in the central government, not to mention the possibility that local control of Novo Brdo might shift to the Albanian parties. Vasic told us that Strpce mayor Stanko Jakovljevic, who heads the government of the other Serb-majority municipality south of the Ibar, also received similar warnings from Samardzic.

Trouble at the RIC

¶5. (C) Recently, workers at two Kosovo government-funded church reconstruction sites in Prizren, managed by the Council of Europe-led Reconstruction Implementation Commission (RIC), discovered that lead roofing plates valued at 10,400 euro had been stolen from the roofs of the Church of the Holy Virgin Ljeviska and the Church of St. Kyriake. While the thefts were disturbing enough in their own right, moderate prelate Bishop Teodosije told us in confidence November 7 that he attended a recent meeting of the Serbian Orthodox Church's (SOC) Synod in Belgrade, at which Samardzic was present. The Synod questioned Teodosije closely about the thefts and about problems with another RIC project in Gjakova/Djakovica.

¶6. (C) Teodosije told us he thought that Samardzic and other hardliners -- including Serbia's former representative to the RIC, Gordana Markovic -- had been planning to call for a complete halt to the SOC's participation in the reconstruction program, and that only a friend in the Synod telling Teodosije to be present at the meeting had forestalled such a decision, as well as the support of various of Teodosije's clerical colleagues in the Synod. Nonetheless, Teodosije said he fears the thefts in Prizren and the issues in Gjakova/Djakovica could still be used as ammunition in that effort. (Note: In close coordination with our international partners, we are working to ensure that the Kosovo government provides adequate security to threatened RIC sites, as well as funding repairs to the churches. A November 16 cabinet meeting is set to approve 50,000 euro to

help with this effort. End Note.)

Provocative Rhetoric in Mitrovica

¶17. (SBU) On November 8, Samardzic visited northern Mitrovica with Russian Ambassador to Serbia Aleksandar Alekseyev. The pair spoke at several events, including the unveiling of a statue in honor of Russian Consul to Kosovo Grigorij Scherdin, who was killed by Kosovo Albanians in 1903. At a later "town hall" event, which ICO PT attendees described as more of a nationalist rally, the gathered crowd of northern Serbs began a chant of "Serbia, Serbia." Samardzic was reported by both Belgrade and Pristina dailies as saying "there would not be peace" if the Albanians unilaterally declared independence, and then flatly asserted that Serbia would take steps to "punish" such actions and "return things to normal."

Comment

¶18. (C) We can expect a continuing escalation of such provocative steps from Belgrade and the northern Kosovo leadership, culminating almost certainly after a Kosovar declaration of independence in Belgrade taking various measures quite marked in their seriousness: perhaps a shutdown of the energy grid into Kosovo, perhaps a shutdown of the border crossings, and possibly the establishment of an entirely new "Kosovo Serb assembly" as well as the assertion of continued political control by Belgrade in Serb-majority areas of Kosovo. The primary task for us will be to ensure that Kosovo's ethnic Albanian leadership -- and, far more challenging, its radical elements -- understand the real costs of responding to Serb provocations with violence or quid pro quo activities. We have already begun spreading this message across the Kosovo political spectrum, and intend

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to intensify the drumbeat as status approaches and as election results lead to Kosovo government formation. We will also need to consider our international responses to these Serbian actions, though admittedly our leverage is limited and we may end up simply having to try and ride out the storm. End Comment.

KAIDANOW